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DEPTH OF THE SURFACE

by Marianne Rogoff

Painter Melinda Cootsona chose the title “A Sense of Place” for her September 2013 show at The Studio Shop long before “Richard Diebenkorn: The Berkeley Years” opened at San Francisco’s DeYoung Museum and art historians launched a series of lectures on his sense of place, though perhaps this is no coincidence. Cootsona expresses a clear love for the work of Diebenkorn and shares his figurative/abstract aesthetic and love of color. The paintings in Cootsona’s newest body of works offer similarly sensuous appreciation for the particular pleasures of California sunlight, but the “sense of place” she depicts may reflect a more psychological definition of the concept. Her figures appear in varying poses of contemplation, reflection, relaxation, and repose, and fill most of the space. The distinction between “place” and “space” is found when the vastness of space is delineated as a particular place, when a marked-off space assumes an identity, whether due to its geography, geology, culture, demographics, or history. Cootsona’s compositions invite viewers to discover their own delineations within the psychic territory she outlines. Through generous applications of paint and numerous layers of shapes, colors, and shadows that move around on the canvas as she works, the artist provides ample room for us to enter the mind-states of her deep-in-thought figures.

“Hissing of Summer Lawns” is one of these paintings, and this is also the title of a 1975 album of songs by Joni Mitchell. Though Mitchell is a Canadian songwriter, she is as associated with California culture as members of the Bay Area Figurative Movement such

as Diebenkorn, Elmer Bischoff, Nathan Oliveira, and Joan Brown. Cootsona's soft/bright color palette evokes the mood of what is so achingly sweet about summertime and summer lawns, and perhaps a bit of nostalgia for Diebenkorn's Berkeley years (1953-1966), Joni Mitchell's '70s, or the artist's own years studying fine art at California College of Arts and Crafts (CCAC, now CCA) in Oakland (BFA 1981). Nostalgia may be defined as a longing for something that never existed, however, and Mitchell's song keeps repeating the word *darkness*, "with a joyful mask," "no color no contrast." In Cootsona's painting, the "hissing" in the title, the dark geometries of corners, and the way the figure leans into whatever is on her mind push us toward our own depths of thought and a spectrum of memories as well. The longest days, hot summer nights, and entire eras pass, at times not fast enough, at others all too quickly. "Hissing of Summer Lawns" invites a moment of pause and observation that is reminiscent of Degas' seated women and Rodin's thinking sculptures, not so much in style of execution as in psychological tone.

The vaguely drawn twin faces in Cootsona's "Mirror" and "Same Coin" ask us to consider what we see (and fail to see) when we look at (or think about) our self, in relation to itself, and in relation to another. Same coin? Two sides? Only two? Hermann Hesse's mid-20th-century psychological novel *Steppenwolf* uses repeating images of mirrors to suggest there are many aspects to this place called *self*. Apparently, we are only able to "individuate" (Jung's term) in relationship with others, who also carry mirrors reflecting shifting images, their own and ours. Like most of the figures in Cootsona's large canvases here, the *Steppenwolf* character is a loner. His preoccupation with his own psyche fills up most of the space in the book just as the figures do in these compositions. A mirror might

be used as an image of infinite space, but in “Mirror” the frame cuts this possibility off. Instead of looking into the clarity of what we might see when we look into our own eyes in a mirror, the figure’s back is against it, not looking into it, lost in thought, looking at what, we do not know.

Steppenwolf finds his way to renewal through a series of interactions: with a male jazz musician, a female guide, and “the Immortals,” great artists from the past like Mozart and Goethe. Cootsona describes her painting process as building up layers then scraping away paint. “These layers of color, shape, and line become both hidden and revealed as they evolve into the final image,” she says. In much the same way, aspects of who we are get built up over time then scraped away; are hidden, then revealed again as we encounter new people, landscapes, and experiences that add up to define our psychic sense of place. The artist’s process is intentional, to leave us “always with underlying layers and depth to be discovered.” The surface is not the whole story of what’s there.

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